Call centre workers allege poor working conditions

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Curtis E. Scott stands outside his former place of work, Sutherland Global Services. The company has recently come under fire for its treatment of employees.

Star Photo: Ian Willms; CREDIT: Ian Willms, The Windsor Star

Curtis E. Scott stands outside his former place of work, Sutherland Global Services. The company has recently come under fire for its treatment of employees. Star Photo: Ian Willms
A computer support call centre that has provided nearly 700 entry-level, government-subsidized jobs has left some workers bitter over what they allege are poor working conditions resulting in high turnover.

Dismissed by politicians instrumental in luring Sutherland Global Services to Windsor as "growing pains," the complaints include payroll shortfalls, cancelled lunch breaks, lower than promised commissions and a culture that places a higher premium on sales than tech support.

"They come into a real economically depressed area like Windsor and make it look like they are doing good. But they are taking us," said Curtis Scott, a high-ranking manager who says he was fired at the end of June - one day before the end of his three-month probation in his supervisory job as a team leader.

"It's an economically depressed town and that's why they came here. If Windsor was booming they never would have come here, never hire you on their dime."

Sutherland, which was welcomed with great fanfare by local leaders last November, says it is pleased with the Windsor operation and that employees are being properly compensated.

For some workers, the arrival of Sutherland was workplace culture shock, demonstrating what a University of Western Ontario study found: Repetitive, high-volume work for pay barely exceeding minimum wage produces high turnover.

MPP Sandra Pupatello (L-Windsor West), who was instrumental during negotiations to bring the India-based company to Windsor by helping provide provincial incentives, said Sutherland has "had to find their feet and realize mistakes (were) made that have to be fixed.

"If there are rough patches we want to help them get through it," Pupatello said.

More than a dozen current and former workers told The Star that seven months after Sutherland opened, employees have been quitting or are being fired in large numbers.

Some employees told The Star that Sutherland's emphasis on technical support fell by the wayside from the start and pressure on employees to meet sales quotas is intense. They say workers during each technical support call are pushed hard to peddle warranties, computers, printers, cameras and laptops.

Sutherland Global executives answered questions about employee complaints with an e-mailed statement from Phil Madden, vice-president and head of operations in Canada.

"We are very pleased with the progress of the company in Windsor," he said. "This community is a strategic part of Sutherland and our clients' expansion plans.

"To our knowledge, all of our employees in Windsor have been paid correctly. We have an open-door policy and encourage all of our employees to bring any concerns to their on-site human resources manager to address and resolve as quickly as possible."

However, Pupatello, Mayor Eddie Francis, and others say Sutherland has privately admitted to making mistakes.

"We have met with Sutherland and they have told us they have had growing problems," said Francis. "They tell us there are new people in place and are committed to fixing issues they have."

On average, someone working in a Canadian call centre will spend just 5.5 minutes per customer call and handle about 100 calls per day, according to Ann Frost of Western University's Richard Ivey School of Business.

Jobs that involve a great deal of repetitive work, are closely monitored and allow little individual discretion on the part of the employee have turnover rates of 36 per cent, while that rate drops to just nine per cent for "high-quality" jobs involving more complex work.

But some Windsor employees allege the issues at Sutherland go beyond complaints about repetitive, low-wage jobs.

Five complaints regarding Sutherland's operation in Windsor have been filed with the Ontario Labour Relations Board, said spokeswoman Belinda Sutton.

The claims were filed by employees between May and August, totalling $976 for unpaid wages, vacation pay and overtime owed between March and July.

The Ministry of Labour is investigating, she said.

Questions about Sutherland's conduct are not unique to Windsor.

A U.S. Department of Labour lawsuit involving workers in Rochester, N.Y., the location of Sutherland's North American headquarters, was settled in May.

Sutherland agreed to pay employees US$144,418 in back wages and damages to resolve the federal lawsuit that alleged nonpayment of overtime.

The U.S. Labor Department said it found that about 300 Sutherland workers in the Rochester area were required to work more than 40 hours during many weeks without being properly compensated.

A separate multimillion-dollar civil lawsuit was filed in September 2005 in U.S. District Court. It has since grown to include 800 Sutherland employees in upstate New York based at the Rochester and Syracuse locations.

Employees in the collective action lawsuit allege the company made an automatic time deduction for lunch breaks even when they worked through lunch, failed to pay for time spent performing

work duties before the start of scheduled shifts, improperly failed to include commissions and bonuses in calculating pay for overtime and failed to pay time and one-half for hours worked over 40 in a week.

With Windsor's manufacturing sector sagging, the promise of even entry level technical jobs at Sutherland, which provides call centre assistance to owners of equipment from powerhouse corporations like Hewlett Packard and Dell, was viewed as a godsend last year.

The provincial government anted up wage and training subsidies. Francis called the arrival of Sutherland a small step toward the reinvention of Windsor as a technology based economy.

In her conversations with Sutherland executives, problems have been acknowledged, Pupatello said, but that's to be anticipated given how it was a startup company that went from zero to 600 in months.

"A lot of training was required and bringing people up to speed," she said. "They are getting more comfortable and a lot of the problems are being smoothed out over time.

"In that sector you generally see a high level of turnover," she said. "Lots of people on welfare want to work and the company has helped to do that. It's a benefit to the city."

Sutherland receives government subsides for employee training and wages.

For every employee it trains, the company gets a grant under programs such as Ontario Works or Job Connect (affiliated with Unemployed Help Centre).

Ronna Warsh, general manager of the city's social and health Services, said $493,000 in tax dollars have been committed to date through Ontario Works - a one-time $400,000 allocation from the province which was recently exhausted and $93,700 from the city-county social services budget.

The city's social services department has taken 376 people off the welfare rolls and put them to work at Sutherland, she said.

As part of the Ontario Works program, the city has job developers on site about twice per week. There have been some reports of problems, but the overall relationship with the company has been good, she said.

Warsh estimated about $1 million in Ontario Works funds have been saved through the city's relationship with the company.

"We are continually talking with (Sutherland) and the people we have referred from Ontario Works," she said. "The (workers) we have talked to are generally satisfied.

"There have been some issues around pay and policy. Since then, they have brought in some new human resources people. If (employees who leave) come back to us, benefits are being re-instated."

Sutherland also asks employees to sign up for a call centre apprenticeship program at St. Clair College, launched when the company opened its doors in Windsor. Employees are urged to accept loans, roughly $400 paid out by the government, to cover enrolment costs, Scott said.

The program requires a combined 4,000 hours of work and classes - roughly two years. Whether workers attend classes or not, Sutherland gets another government subsidy, the workers claim.

"It's not right what they are doing," said Kevin Manetta, a former supervisor who quit in March. "They sign you up for training to get grants, then when the grants run out they don't care if they keep you or not.

"It needs a rigourous overhaul. People should get paid and treated fairly."

St. Clair College said the apprenticeship program was developed at the request of Sutherland. It offers the opportunity for those enrolled to receive a call centre certificate of apprenticeship under provincial government guidelines.

The college agreed because it is designed to assist people with little education get a start to move on to higher learning or better jobs in the industry.

Sutherland gets an employer incentive tax rebate, said a college official. About 450 Sutherland employees have registered with the program to date, with a goal of up to 2,000.

Some former and current employees accuse Sutherland of preying on the most vulnerable - immigrants, single moms or the unemployed.

Manetta has set up a website - crazysutherland.com - where alleged corporate misdeeds are detailed by dozens of workers in hundreds of postings.

Manetta, who quit in late March, said his Sutherland experience was so bad, he set up the website to give others a voice and realize they are not alone in their troubles with the company. He has 172 registered members on his site with 287,000 hits and more than 1,200 posts.

A computer systems graduate of Fanshawe College and Cape Breton University, Manetta said he moved up quickly into a supervisory role and witnessed overtime and commission paycheque shortfalls and breaks or lunches being denied.

"People go to take breaks and they yell at them to keep taking calls," said Manetta, who now lives in Burlington and works at a business management firm.

"This is a place that is really crazy," he said. "It was horrible. I can't believe a company like that exists."

A female floor agent - who asked not to be named out of fear she would be fired - has been with Sutherland in Windsor from the start and said only nine hirees from her training class of 29 remain.

Many left on their own after refusing to sell or were terminated by Sutherland supervisors when they failed to meet quotas, she said.

Employee phones are monitored occasionally by Hewlett Packard or Dell staff in the U.S., who complain to Sutherland if a worker in Windsor is off the phone even for a few minutes, she said.

Workers are supposed to get two 15-minute breaks with a half hour for lunch, she said. The only way to go to the washroom is to put a customer on hold.

Sales were never talked about during her three weeks of training. But when she got on the floor it was made clear her group was competing with other teams and locations.

"People are under stress," she said. "If you are not on the phone they are screaming at you. But people need the job so bad or they fear losing subsidy status if they quit, so they're trapped."